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ABSTRACT

This guide for school districts offers a quick outline for developing good communications skills and public relations with news media personnel. Guidelines for good press relations are provided that emphasize the importance of keeping two-way, open communications with the media, with attention to: accuracy; being prepared; sharing the bad news as well as the good; being aware of how school projects can be tied in with local, state, or national issues; helping communication by getting answers and passing them on; targeting messages to the right audience; being available; and watching out for jargonese. Ways to develop contacts in the media and how to place news items in the local media are also suggested. Basic rules for radio and television interviews--including tips on how to dress and behave on camera--conclude the guide. (DB)

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Accessing the Media

Judy Parker, ASPR

Kent School District

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Too often, people are quick to say that the press never covers any good news. They say, "How come they're never here when we want them, but always here when we don't need them?"

Last year our district received 9,738 inches of newspaper space (only academic stories...no athletics) plus tv minutes. Though many of those stories are fun , they are also interesting and can contribute to changing the image of the school system. Every time the media covers your school, it's free publicity for all of us.

Remember that the media does not exist to serve as cheerleaders for the your school district or your school. They are watchdogs. It's their job to ask tough questions.

"Some days you feel like the bird...
other days, you feel like the statue."
unknown

Lucky 13 Guidelines to Good Press Relations

1. Don't be defensive. Defensiveness is often taken as a sign of guilt. If you can answer a reporter's question, do so honestly.

2. When a reporter calls, respond promptly. If you will be out, be sure a system is established for handling news media inquiries.

3. If news media personnel can't make it to cover a story, offer to drop some notes off at the newspaper, or provide a telephone report for radio stations.

4. Keep in mind that all reports are public property. You must provide this type of data to the news media, if it is requested. We are a public agency. Learn the rules about public information.

5. Be aware of deadlines. A story is of little use if you've missed the deadline and it has become old news. The media has fixed deadlines. Don't plan anything after 4:00 p.m. that you want covered.

6. Avoid educational jargon. If you use it, explain it. Show how your story is relevant.

7. If you don't have the answer, it's OK to say, "I don't know for sure, but I'll call you back in 10 minutes." Then be sure to call back. Never, ever, lie.

8. If your information includes complex numbers and figures, round them off.

9. Nothing is ever "off the record." Reporters are not paid to keep secrets.

10. Never ask a reporter to show you a story before it is published.

11. Never say, "No comment." Say exactly what you are doing...studying the issue, gathering the facts, etc.

12. After an interview, let key people know about it . This approach avoids conflicting information.

13. And, if a reporter has done what you consider a good job, don't forget to say THANKS!

It is extremely important to keep two-way, open communications with the media. The way they portray our actions can make the difference in our community image. Here are some guidelines for keeping your credibility with the media.

Accuracy: All reporters will quickly tell you there are some sources they trust. The ones they trust get better coverage. Every item we send them or tell them over the phone is checked for accuracy (including spelling). It may take a few extra moments to check but in the long run will keep our credibility.

Be Ready: Make sure you have researched what you need to know before you meet with a reporter. You should have basic facts about your school available (enrollment, number of teachers, opening and closing times, total staff). However, if a question is raised and you simply do not know, be honest. Tell the reporter you will get the details and call him/her before the deadline...then follow through. If you are confident and know what you are talking about, the reporter is more likely to stand behind you.

Share the Bad News As Well As The Good: It is extremely important to admit setbacks or mistakes and to share them. This alleviates the shroud of mystery so often connected with large institutions. If we share our problems as well as our achievements, reporters will not always be looking for hidden skeletons.

Be Aware Of What Is Going On Around You: Make sure you know what is happening in the district and the world around you. How can you tie in a project at your school with local, state, and national issues? Elements of a good story are visual, human interest, different/unique or with a lesson.

Help, Don't Hinder The Communication: If you can get the answer, do it and pass it on without extra bureaucratic hoopla! Reporters hate the wild goose chase for information. Don't put them on hold.

Target Messages To Hit The Right Audience: A reporter or assignment editor must be lured into covering a positive story. They will be here for the problems. Never call reporters just before their deadlines. That's usually late afternoon. Their minds are occupied with other things and they will forget your call. Remember that television must have a visual story. You will have to express to them the visual part of your project. No talking heads, meetings, etc. but action shots of students doing something will get their attention. Awards are nice and very important but a blurb about an award is probably the best you can get unless the person has overcome unbelievable handicaps to achieve success.

Be Available: Make sure the media can contact you easily. If you are out of the building be sure the person answering the call knows who should answer the call.

Watch Out for Jargonese: We all get lost in educationese such as time on task, IEPs, SLOs, ESDs, etc.) Reporters don't know what those words mean. Their story must be simple enough for a person on the eighth grade level. Help them out. Have a simple explanation. Don't give them figures without ready reference about what that means to Dick and Jane!

Using the Back Door

THE KEY IS TO DEVELOP YOUR OWN CONTACTS. Unfortunately, we cannot call all the media daily so developing some contacts of your own are important...and will follow you to any job locations in the Puget Sound area.

* Members of your school community are friends and neighbors of reporters, editors, etc. This is the best way to get positive coverage. Find out who in your school community can make a contact for you.

* If a parent or business person gives your school a compliment on a program or on something that impressed them, ask them to take five minutes and write a letter to the editor of the Valley Daily News or the South Times. People will take note of the positive feelings a fellow community member has.

* The valley newspapers have a "School" column. They agree to run everything from PTA and carnival announcements to honor rolls.

* The South Times has a column called " Hats Off To..." They'll run names and achievements of people in our area.

* Have a teacher, parent or your school media contact make an invitation to a reporter by sending a special note from a student. Reporters are buried in press releases and black and white paper. They are likely to take notice if a classroom invites them to something with an artsy, handwritten request. Follow up with a call to explain just what this idea includes.

* Remember that holidays are slow news days. Plan release of information for the day after a holiday when the media hungers for news. Also the "fifth" week of the month is usually slow...no board or council meetings.

* Deliver your most important points in 45 seconds or less. That's all you get for TV. Get to the point and make every word count.

* Admit it when you make a mistake. In the next breath, explain what you're doing to rectify the problem. Don't try to cover up.

* Sometimes reporters make mistakes. In such an instance, talk to the reporter about the error first. If there is a pattern of inaccurate reporting, start documentation to discuss with the editor. But, you'd better be sure before contacting the editor.

* Resist the temptation to make comments to or about the media at a public meeting. It makes the reporter feel uncomfortable and resentful.

Effective Television Presentations

While every radio and TV interview and talk show is different, there are some basic rules you can follow in any interview to make your presentation effective.

Be Prepared!

^ Make sure you are familiar with the format of the show. Listen or watch in advance.

^ Find out the interviewer's approach...consumer oriented? News oriented? What exactly is the topic and does the interviewer have the same position that you have.

^ Ask for the names of the other guests or questioners besides the host/moderator.

^ Read the paper before your interview in case a late news story breaks that affects your topic.

^ Anticipate questions and decide on your best response.

^ Decide on two or three important points you want to make and memorize them.

^ Do your homework to ensure that the facts supporting your position are quick and current.

Be Calm!

^ Avoid sitting between two questioners, especially if they are hostile. Take a seat to one side.

^ If you have a physical reason for preferring one profile (deafness in one ear,) tell the staff.

^ Keep your hands away from table mikes and don't look down or sigh heavily into lavaliere (around the neck) or clip-on mikes.

^ Don't drum your fingers or tape your feet.

^ Avoid quick body movements like standing up . You may be abruptly out of camera range.

Look Great!

^ Dress conservatively. Men should wear dark suits, solid (not white) shirts and dark socks. Women should wear a street length dress or suit and avoid white, deep red or small prints.

^ Don't wear loose or exceptionally heavy jewelry. Avoid flashy items that might distract.

^ Remove any nametags, pens, etc. from your pocket and from view.

^ Keep your head up. Lower chins look guilty.

^ Don't look at the ceiling or for divine intervention.

^ Don't wear photo-grey or tinted glasses.

^ Don't slouch or lean to one side. If you're standing, don't rock back and forth or put your hands in your pockets.

Take Charge!

^ Use related questions as a springboard to make your points.

^ Keep your answers short and direct and positive.

^ If you want to drop a topic, put a friendly cut-off into your answer.

^ Don't go off on a tangent unless you can steer the discussion to a more positive area.

^ Phrase your answers with the public in mind.

^ Take the time to think about your answer; don't feel pressured into instant responses.

^ If questioners don't allow you to finish your answer, state firmly and pleasantly that you'd like to answer one question at a time.

^ Always finish your answer before taking on the next question and don't repeat a hostile question. It will be attributed to you.

^ Make a concerted effort to avoid jargon.

^ It's perfectly acceptable to refuse to answer a question as long as you do it graciously and don't appear to be covering up.

^ If you aren't really sure of an answer, say so.

^ Don't use complicated statistics or dollar figures. People can't follow without a visual.

^ Refer to the interviewer by name occasionally.

^ Never lie.

^ Never lose your temper.

^ Don't be defensive.

Good visuals are a must for TV!